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ABSTRACT

This paper maps methodological attempts the researcher made during dissertation fieldwork to marry arts-based inquiry and literacy research. The dissertation focused on the symbolic illiteracies and aesthetic learning practices of middle school girls in an urban arts program, Dramagirls. Two specific arts-based methods, Reggio-Emilia-based visual documentation and performance ethnography, were used in the research approach, data collection, and analysis. The ontological and epistemological intersections of the dissertation are described, and how they encouraged a performance and visual orientation during fieldwork and analysis is outlined. The theoretical background and creative process are detailed for the two central prongs of the orientation: (1) a dialogic, performance-oriented research approach; and (2) a visual aesthetic for reconstructing a socio-symbolic analysis of Dramagirls discourse. The paper also discusses who, by constructing documentation collages and an ethnographic performance, the researcher was able to play and to process the "role" as researcher within the theatrical culture and solve the qualitative research problem of honoring and translating highly embodies aesthetic learning practices within traditional forms of print-based research. The paper also briefly highlights how the pursuit of these methods illuminated certain qualities in the data that would not have easily registered if reconstructed as print-based findings. (Contains 14 figures and 55 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Performing and Documenting an Educational Expedition: Using Performance and Reggio Emilia-Based Documentation Panels as Research Practices

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association meeting, Chicago, April 21, 2003[1]

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Abstract

This paper maps methodological attempts I made during dissertation fieldwork to marry arts-based inquiry with literacy research. The dissertation focuses on the symbolic literacies and aesthetic learning practices of middle school girls in an urban arts program, Dramagirls. I discuss my use of two specific arts-based methods, Reggio-Emilia based visual documentation, and performance ethnography as significant techniques in my research approach, data collection and analysis. First I describe the ontological and epistemological intersections of my dissertation study in new literacy studies and aesthetic learning, and how they encouraged a performative and visual orientation during fieldwork and analysis. I detail the theoretical background and creative process for two central prongs of this orientation, (1) a dialogic, performance-oriented research approach and (2) a visual aesthetic for reconstructing a socio-symbolic analysis of Dramagirls discourse. I also discuss how by constructing documentation collages and an ethnographic performance I was able to both play and process my "role" as researcher within their theatrical culture, and solve the qualitative research problem of honoring and translating highly embodied, aesthetic learning practices within traditional forms of print-based research. Finally, I briefly highlight how my pursuit of these methods illuminated certain qualities in the data that would not have easily registered if reconstructed as print-based findings.

I. Introduction

The ever-expanding horizon of educational research continues to challenge researchers' disciplinary practices and field experiences. As we push the bounds of where and how the dynamic act of learning occurs in various environments, genres, and media, this "social science" field is bursting its seams to the point where our understandings of learning are indebted to a myriad of disciplinary approaches. Advocating arts-based inquiry as an alternative method for qualitative research, Eisner argues that, "we exploit different forms of representation to construct meanings that might otherwise elude us" (1993, p. 6). However, determining how arts-based inquiry might help complement, even extend the ontological and epistemological roots of our research questions can be an ambiguous expedition (Courtney, 1995; Taylor, 1996; Wagner, 1998). How we understand the learning activity we're documenting, and how we interact with it as a researcher, influences how we choose to translate that knowledge across traditional disciplinary borders. I believe it's a journey we should share more explicitly.

This paper maps methodological attempts I made during my dissertation study to marry arts-based inquiry with the scientific leanings of educational research. I discuss two particular arts-based methods, documentation collage and ethnographic performance, that emerged as significant ways to re-construct, analyze and communicate my research to both participating and academic communities. My dissertation focuses on the aesthetic practices and symbolic literacies of Dramagirls, an urban, community-based arts program for middle school girls. Guided by a collaborative, expeditionary learning approach, and the vocabulary of spectacle theater[2]—a genre that encourages diverse modes of presentation such as physical gesture, puppetry, dance, poetry, stilting and mask-work, Dramagirls learn to develop non-scripted, theatrical performances around a specific theme or concept. In the case of this study beginning in January of 2002, twenty-three

[2] Reconstructing this term from its Radio City musical hall connotations, Redmoon Theater uses spectacle theater to identify their large-scale, multi-media pageantry and parades, where the production involves and engages the urban community environment.

girls[3] embarked on a six-month, theatrical exploration of a concept they named "Girltopia," or an ideal world for girls. Lead by two teaching artists and volunteer adult mentors, they had spent several months brainstorming general concerns about being a girl in Chicago, and had formed guiding questions for their artistic expedition such as, "What would our ideal world look like? What matters for girls in everyday life? What do girls dream about? Guided by multi-media platforms set up by their Redmoon teachers, the girls then created objects, actions, and poetic narratives to not only dramatize, but realize their ideal girl's world in daily rehearsal practice. By way of this multi-modal artistic process, they developed an improvisational spectacle, "Architects of Change: A Girl's Utopia" which performs the story of Remedios, a young girl who, haunted by her everyday fears and judgments, has forgotten how to dream. Guided by a benevolent moon, she travels in search of new sources of strength in Girltopia, a world inhabited by imaginative creatures and protective goddesses, including "the objective source", "the nurturing mother", "the joker" and "the warrior"[4]. Introduced to a new bill of rights and the dramatic wisdoms of these female protectors, Remedios becomes empowered with renewed ability to take charge of her experience as an urban girl. In the process, I also observed things of educational significance--that Dramagirls developed aesthetic capacities, multi-modal, symbolic literacies, and became cultural producers.

My scholarly interests live between two fields of inquiry—literacy and arts education, and juggling the interests of these two fields is what I've found both compelling and trying. Having worked over several years as a mentor and performer with Redmoon Theater's Dramagirls, I was already well versed in the programs' aesthetic, and its artistic learning approach. Now I wanted to describe their art-making process as a multi-modal learning discourse that not only employs multiple literacies beyond talk and print, but as a means for youth to reconstruct the complexities of their human experience. My burning question was, how did the Dramagirls learn aesthetic and symbolic literacy practices in a variety of media, and what might

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[3] All research participants were members of Dramagirls, ages 11-15, and of Latina, Caucasian and African American descent.

[4] These character archetypes were introduced as theatrical platforms by the teaching artists as different perspectives for confronting one's fears—i.e., seek objectivity, nurturing, humor or, fight back! However, the girls were responsible for developing how these symbolic characters became manifest in the Girltopia performance.

these arts-based practices teach us about youth's capacity for producing creative, cultural forms of meaning?

Fortunately, arts educators, literacy scholars and performance anthropologists researching potential connections between performing arts practices and literacy development have paved a theoretical path for my understanding of Dramagirls discourse as both formal and social literacy practice (Heath et al, 1999a & b; Worthman, 1999) Advocates of arts-based learning have continually emphasized the importance of aesthetic sensibility in youth's ability to confront standardized meanings, imagine new possibilities, and create their own texts and contexts for literacy practice (Courtney, 1995; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1991; Greene, 1995). Work in alternative learning discourses, specifically the "New Literacy Studies" movement (Gee, 1997, 1999, 2001; Heath et al, 1999a & b; Lemke, 1992; Kress, 2001) has re-focused literacy research's attention from studying individual, cognitive skills toward specifying the socio-cultural contexts and genres in which youth learn and identify with language and other sign-systems. As a result, the term "multiple literacies" has developed recognizing how diverse cultural discourse groups, such as science clubs and community theaters, shape emergent meanings using multiple communication media, particularly how participating youth use materials to design new meanings, and ultimately, new "social futures" (New London Group, 1996). Focusing on how youth produce meaning across a variety of disciplines, materials and technologies offers new opportunities to research how textual and contextual meaning is mutually constructed.

My research specifically considers how Dramagirls engage in the literacy practices of *intertextuality*—the juxtaposition of two separate texts that are socially recognized by a discourse community (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1995), and *intermediality*—the act of reading and writing across multiple symbol systems (Semali & Palliotet, 1999). I use these terms to theorize how Dramagirls art-making with diverse materials and imaginative processes influence the form and meaning of their literate discourse, particularly how they develop, understand and articulate aesthetic, conceptual and symbolic meanings. Finally, theories of cultural performance (Conquergood, 1991; McLaren, 1999; Turner, 1974, 1982, 1988; Willis, 2000) inspired my understanding of Dramagirls process-oriented learning as a dynamic means by which youth

represent and potentially transform themselves and their world-vision within existing socio-cultural networks. By documenting the girls using these theoretical lenses--aesthetic development, multi-modal "text-making" techniques, and cultural performance, I wanted to understand and interpret how their practices contributed to meaningful literacy production.

I'm video-recording by the gym entrance and I overhear some voices practicing down in the stairwell. Trusting my camera to stay with the dance for the moment, I grab my tape recorder and take the stairs quietly to see who's speaking. Two of the older girls, Bianca, and Brenda and a mentor, Tara are huddling at the stair base trying to choreograph gestures for The Warrior's chorus. I approach and smile, stopping on the second to bottom step and hoping my silence will give me welcome. They say "hey" and go on with it. They're re-working a poem Bianca wrote weeks ago remembering "a time it was hard being a girl." Donning the warrior goddess mask, Bianca begins, and her base-range voice startles me:

Bianca: "I am the warrior." (Upon her words she steps forward into a plié, raises her arms in wrestler pose, and levels her masked gaze, continuing . .

"Goddess of action," (her chorus follows, hip-hop kick to the side, and Kung-foo pose follows the extended leg, arms fisted)

"power, of boundaries and self-protection"
(she circles her arms across her chest and they step in unison, almost warrior yoga stance)

Brenda: "Don't you!" (Brenda sidles in, a bit higher in tenor as she speaks but displaying equal attitude with the hair flip. I'm feeling a Charlie's angels moment.)

Tara: "Don't you!" (mimics Brenda's attitude)

Bianca: "Don't you *'Listen missy'* me."
(folds her arms and shakes her torso like girls can)

"You shouldn't give me attitude cause I got some of my own."

Brenda: "When I get hurt, I fight back!"
(pummels Bianca's shoulder)

Tara: " I ask for what I want."
(gets on one knee, hands clasped)

Brenda: "Maybe I am right and I have a point."
(steps forward with hand on hip and finger upward)

"You could learn something if you listened to me"

Trio: "Listen to me, listen to me . . ."
(Brenda and Tara repeat, whispering and circling Bianca, touching her shoulders)

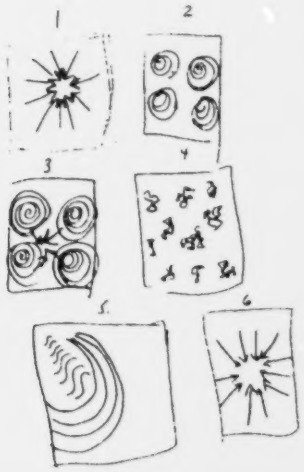
Figure 1: Fieldnote, April 22, 2002 Logan Square church)

When it came to choosing specific methods for documenting and interpreting this site, however, I was startled to find that after sorting through a bevy of qualitative, social science approaches, none seemed adequate for expressing the Dramagirls theatrical and symbolic genre of learning—particularly the girls immersion in non-print-based materials, imaginative talk and improvisation. Though my two chosen root methodologies, ethnography and grounded theory, provided useful techniques such as participant observation, thick description, and constant

comparison of emerging themes and patterns, these methods still did not provide modes or mediums that could accurately represent Dramagirls' learning experience (see Figure 1).

Feeling bound by traditional modes of field-note recording, oral interviews and written analysis, the problem of translating and reconstructing the highly embodied, theatrical forms of Dramagirl artistic discourse became central to my fieldwork process. Figure 1, for example, represents multiple, embodied learning contexts and media, including an early reflective writing exercise, a poetry sculpting session, and a dramatic improvisation where the girls played out their fears, judgments as well as embodying four archetypal goddesses.[1] Was a typical narrative approach appropriate for rendering the multi-modal layers and contexts that enabled the potential meanings of this warrior chorus?

Another case in point—an early discovery I made during fieldwork was how often difficult it was for even the teaching artists to verbally articulate what they're trying to accomplish with their artistic environment. In preparation for an interview with Kate Thomas, the Dramagirls director and a very talented teacher and artist, I had asked her to "map" out for me how she saw as their learning process. My request was for a "descriptive illustration" to contribute to a visual coded map that I had also been developing, but I had not imagined the following drawing (Figure 2) to be her response:



Kate: "This is how I see the artistic energy of a Dramagirls evening happening: we circle up (1), then we move into theater games, filling the space (2), then we switch group exercises (3), then we partner off and work on word poetry (4), than we give feedback (5), and finally we circle and close together (6).

Figure 2

Being familiar with similar drawings in a teaching journal she had shared previously, I should however, not have been surprised by this rendering. She was giving a sensory[5] reading of her experience teaching Dramagirl workshops, particularly the way Dramagirl energy moves during workshops. For both the warrior chorus, and the teachers pedagogical drawing, Polanyi's (1962) words come to mind here: "We know more than we can tell," (p. 6) that is, art-making practices are often their own explanation, they have no other logic beyond their own formal and imaginative sense. How could such implicit thinking and feeling come to light in my interpretation of Dramagirls learning?

Expressing the quality of aesthetic activity has long frustrated those trying to present art processes and forms within other disciplinary contexts. Commenting on her attempt to develop a theory of art within the language of philosophy, Langer (1953) recognizes that "it is in fact, impossible to talk about art without adopting to some extent the language of the artists. " (intro, ix) She warns her fellow philosophers artistic language is fundamentally "metaphorical," "poetic" and "plastic" (ix) in order that they may communicate the abstract, symbolic world they explore. These symbolic worlds, such as the theatrical world of Girltopia, thus do not have set vocabularies; rather, they develop through the dynamic, internal movements of specific artistic forms. Artistic forms themselves harbor internal meanings that emerge through tensions between the inner materials given by the artist—emotional, psychological, cultural, and the potential of the art's medium's formal properties, such as the features of a mask. What ultimately then distinguishes things "artistic," argues Langer, is that they are endowed through these dynamic tensions with a "significant form", and this quality gives art objects and performances symbolic meanings and feelings greater than an artists' initial intentions. Describing this emergence of visual and performance-based "significant forms" in Dramagirls aesthetic discourse became the biggest hurdle I faced with traditional tools of participant observation such as audio recording, verbal conversations, and written field notes--all forms which prioritize linguistic or text-oriented responses.

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[5] I should note here that my understanding of the word *aesthetic* lies in its Latin root translation as "sensory", so I use *sensory* or *felt* meaning throughout this paper to connote aesthetic understandings.

My concern for developing knowledge about implicit learning modes echoes in educational circles, fueling each researcher's question as to what symbolic language might best represent their qualitative data. Despite the growing number of qualitative studies in creative literacy and arts environments, scholars note the lack of richly descriptive accounts of alternative learning discourses that stretch beyond program evaluations or measures of standard academic relevancy. In her review of language arts and drama research, Wagner (1998) highlights the lack of in-depth observations of drama interactions, or "descriptions that capture the immediacy and power of the child's struggle to make meaning" (p. 52). After completing a review of performing arts modes in language arts classrooms, Anatheses (1997) still found a limited knowledge of how youth "act, embody, shape and feel their way into a deep knowing" (p. 97). Both statements witness a concern for detailing the emerging reality of learning processes, rather than products, but they also elicit concern with the form in which these processes are presented. My concern with interpreting Dramagirls discourse was similar-- how could I get at the immediacy of the girls daily learning practices, and even more importantly, how could I present these practices as an embodied, deep knowing?

By adopting complementary social science practices (empirical, phenomenological, ethnographic, action research case study) as well as alternative paradigms (artistic, critical theory), researchers of learning activity have addressed these concerns with varying rates of success (Courtney, 1995; Grady, 1996). I want to argue that one problem with translating learning processes may be that many researchers adopt innovative theories or paradigms and stop there. Without applying the live, imaginative practices of their research participants to their actual methodological practice, the potential of such alternative research paradigms to bridge interpretative gaps in educational scholarship may not be realized. The remainder of this paper discusses what happened when I decided to visually re-construct the girls multi-media explorations, as well as learn to embody their emerging dramatic discourses. By creating four large documentation panels, and scripting an interactive performance around them to present to graduate student peers, I attempted to facilitate a more meaningful connection between artistic

and educational discourses. These mid-fieldwork choices emerged from art and performance-based perspectives on the learning environment, my research role, and my interpretative process.

II. Models of Approach: Orienting Research in Performance and Aesthetic Practice

Past experience with developing performing arts and humanities projects with youth involved me in a world rich with physical, symbolic and textual activity, full of fleeting, qualitative moments that had to be felt to be understood. Additionally, I had found artistic learning to be powerfully engaged with reconstructing participants experiences of their everyday realities via imaginary contexts (Courteney, 1995). The immediate, aesthetic quality of these arts experiences drew me to seek out research approaches characterized by both imaginative, dialogic performances (Green, 1995; Fabian, 1990; Lather, 1991; Courtney, 1995), as well as what Eisner (2000) calls an "aesthetics of practice".

Beyond trusting my instincts and experience, choosing arts-based inquiry as an alternative model of approach required that I qualify how it supported my initial research goals, and my qualitative fieldwork approach. The philosophies of Greene (1995) and Eisner (1991a & b, 1993) were the first to impress me with arts' power to engage problems of literacy practice and research process, as well as offer complementary ways to practice qualitative study. Establishing a qualitative difference between artistic and more standardized forms of communication, both Greene and Eisner argue that the arts exercise our imaginations to more creatively engage us with experiencing, and reconstructing the immediate, sensory world. Though it may first seem inappropriate grounds for scientifically validating one's theories, adopting the Dramagirls imaginative approach to a variety of media helped me to access the possibilities of their learning discourse[6]. Ultimately, I wanted to understand how they were using their imaginative construct, Girltopia, to develop girlhood meanings left unexplored in their ordinary experiences. Greene writes of art's promise to literacy,

[6] See Eisner, 1991b & Eisner & Barone (1997) for arguments on art-based inquiry as valid form of research.

> "Becoming literate is also a matter of transcending the given, of entering a field of possibles. We are moved to do that, however, only when we become aware of rifts, gaps in what we think is reality. We have to be articulate enough and able to exert ourselves to name what we see around us.
>
> (Green, 1995, p. 11)

For Greene, literacy, like the arts, requires one to exert oneself imaginatively, to transcend given standards in order to reach an understanding of one's reality, and to initiate a dialogue in response to gaps, rifts, and ambiguities one experiences in that reality. Calling upon Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism, Greene suggests that becoming literate in the world requires that we engage with many voices and objects outside ourselves, for only a slight percentage of what we communicate belongs to us. For me to become literate in this new research territory of arts-based literacies also required a different kind of engagement—a research performance characterized by imaginative risk-taking and reflexive dialogue.

Like my theoretical approach to Dramagirl discourse, orienting my methodological process as an active, dialogic performance made tangible my research responsibilities to daily learning activity and relations within the Dramagirls community:

> No longer is the researcher a subject, a representing and representative consciousness . . . there is no longer any representation, just action, theory's action, the action of practice in the relationship of networks.
>
> (Deleuze, quoted in Lather, 1991, p. 155)

Though we can be skeptical of Deleuze's claim that theory does not also "represent," I want to support the critical/praxis theory perspective that the lines distinguishing researcher from practitioner, intellectual from community organizer are wholly insignificant. Whether I planned it to be or not, what I was theorizing about Dramagirls' multiple literacies was potentially responsible to real educational practice for both arts and literacy educators. And, the further I explored Dramagirls learning, the further convinced I was that beyond contributing to research conversations, my fieldwork must practice aiding Dramagirl participants in understanding how they contributed to their own creative learning process. I want to distinguish my concern with active approaches from *action research*. With action research, a researcher's methods direct participants to pursue a specific inquiry, whereas, I was engaging as another actor in the midst of a theatrical inquiry that Dramagirl participants had already set in motion.

My general mode of proceeding, which I refer to as "performance-oriented" research, was influenced by the dynamic, ethnographic vocabularies and methods in the developing field of performance ethnography (Conquergood, 1991; Fabian, 1990; Jackson, 1998; Turner, 1982, 1986). Turner redefined the terms of cultural anthropology by understanding human beings as *homo performans*, performers who are capable of inventing and transforming their realities through social drama. In doing so, he reprioritized embodied forms of communication, such as theater and ritual, as significant cultural discourse. For Turner, human performances are ultimately knowledge-producing. By locating performance at the center of cultural interpretation, Turner and others have also influenced the method by which we perform as researchers. For instance, Fabian (1990) understands daily social rituals and theatrical performances not just as acts of "giving form to" (pg. 11) cultural meaning, but performance becomes for him a methodological verb, a way of proceeding as a player in a cultural event. As a theoretical lens

Me: So tell me about wearing the joker mask.

Sonia: We had to do this gesture, you know?
Like this silent performance of our character,
And it's hard because you actually want to be funny. . .
How do you make a funny face?
Okay, make a funny face.
One two three . . .

Me: Okay, (I oblige, laughing), but let's hear you play the joker

Sonia: Okay, okay., people, let's get you happy!
(hands spread in preparation)
Do you want me to tell you a joke about your life?
You are crazy.
(pointing her finger at me tauntingly)
What about, laughter?!
What about, don't take yourself so seriously.
Whaddaya looking at?
So I've got a bowl on my head.
This is nature, people. This is creativity!
(rehearsal transcript, 4/1/ 2002)

Figure 3

and a methodology, then. I came to use performance not only as a theoretical platform and medium for communicating analyses of Dramagirl discourse, but also as a means to establish a dialogic relationship with research participants.

By asking the ethnographer to not only watch, but bodily "do" in an effort to understand and describe cultural discourse, performance ethnography plays out the ambiguous relationship between researcher and participant, both whom are immersed in embodied knowledge production, albeit for different purposes (Conguergood, 1991; Goffman, 1959). My research performance, as I saw it, was a negotiation I had to work out daily within the artistic life of Dramagirl teaching artists and girls. We were co-performers[7], even co-researchers in an expeditionary process, the making of Girltopia (Figure 3). The Dramagirls inquiry into an ideal world for girls was as detailed and serious as mine, and their expertise as meaning-producers grew in tandem with my own emerging understandings of their dramatic play. Considering myself a co-performer in their Girltopia process quickly influenced my role in the learning space, as well as how I collected data and interacted with participants. When they determined that I was going to be a constant presence in their process, the girls took my questions and my cameras seriously, if not a bit coyishly. They also welcomed me into their process--not necessarily as a native "Dramagirl", nor a "Dramamama" (a name given to adult mentors)--but as a trustworthy knowledge carrier that could contribute to their understanding of Girltopia.

Considering me a teacher and a peer in their learning process, the girls also had no qualms about refusing questions of mine they found "silly", criticizing images they found "ugly" or critiquing my arts-based methods, such as one 5th grader's description of my documentation panels as "messy, I mean they don't really make any sense. Words here, pictures everywhere. They need titles!"(Fieldnotes, March 2002). Many girls learned to work the video-camera during rehearsals and took great interest in interviewing their co-participants, even myself at times.

In turn, I often conducted interviews as spontaneous, open-ended conversations within class dialogue, and sometimes I engaged in the girls' private, dramatic play before rehearsal, and in their chatter on car rides home. My mode of questioning was not direct but aimed to

[7] I am indebted to Dwight Conguergood of Northwestern University for this performance ethnography term, which he prefers to researcher / subject or interviewee / interviewer positions.

reciprocate participant contexts and responses, and I often found myself in role reversal, imitating the girls' masked gestures and speaking their theatrical language in order to connect (Figure 3). It wasn't until three months into fieldwork, however, that I recognized a need to more formally represent my engagement in these participant experiences.

III. Developing an Aesthetics of Practice

Embodied, responsive engagement in the field alone, however, does not necessarily complete a model of arts-based inquiry. As I mentioned earlier, presentational form had become one of the biggest blocks to understanding how I would communicate my data. To qualify one's research as arts-based, argues Eisner (2001), it is crucial to establish an aesthetics of practice, or a formal way of collecting and communicating research that establishes not just the literal or the relational, but also presents the sensory qualities of one's data. Rather than thinking as a social scientist, I had to start thinking and questioning like a theater director or dance choreographer — What is the feeling or the look that this data generates? What materials and actors am I using to produce that effect? Still, the scientist in us might question, is aesthetic quality reliable or valid? I want to argue that thinking aesthetically does not necessarily overstep the potential of data. Just as you can only push a dancer's body so far, you can only push data so far. The power lies in the interpretative act.

Creating an aesthetic platform for any interpretative process begins with how you look or listen to the thing you're interested in, whether you're studying learners or trees. A painter himself, Eisner's (1993) theories about arts-based, educational inquiry are grounded in how we employ our imaginations to become sensitive to the sensory world, and then how we create a medium to frame and edit that experience. Eisner gave me a way to focus my observations of Dramagirls dramatic and visual inquiries as an artist might:

> "Experience is the bedrock upon which meaning is constructed and that experience in significant degree depends on our ability to get in touch with the qualitative world we inhabit. This qualitative world is immediate before it is mediated, presentational before it is representational, sensuous before it is symbolic . . . Getting in touch is itself an act of discrimination, a fine-grained sensitively nuanced selective process . . ." (Eisner, 1993, 5)

The immediate sensory world is not only where many artists begin, it is also arguably where any ethnographer of cultural discourse begins before they are able to abstract what is commonly called a "thick description" or "cultural poetics"(Geertz, 1973) from raw data. Linguistic anthropologists and performance ethnographers have struggled with prioritizing the immediate sensory experience rather than relying on a more text-centered approach (Duranti, 1997; Fabian, 1990). One of my primary concerns for representing the Dramagirls fieldsite was that it not merely be translated into academic discourse, but also physically re-experienced and performed as both a multi-layered cultural performance (Turner, 1982, 1988; Conguergood, 1991) and a sensuous, educational space (Rasmussen & Wright, 2001; Willis, 2000; Worthman, 1999). To do this, though, I needed to work from the girls' artistic vocabulary.

Building a Aesthetic Vocabulary with Socio-Symbolic Analysis:

This led me to prioritize the aesthetic and social languages of Dramagirl participants that I experienced firsthand into a creative, analytic frame. To use Geertz's words, I wanted to give this vague, mega-concept of the Dramagirls discourse "a sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively with them." (Geertz, 1973 p. 23) Gee and Green's (1997) review of ethnographic approaches to research in social discourses emphasizes the need to get in touch with those live processes that encourage "world-building, activity-building, identity building and connection building" (p. 121) in a particular learning culture. By creating a theatrical text and context for thinking about their ideal world for girls, I had observed that the Dramagirls were learning to develop a variety of live, embodied discourse practices; in effect, they were researching their own imaginative culture not just cognitively and socially, but also aesthetically speaking through bodily form and physical objects. These embodied practices were springboards for participants' learning and cultural production, and thus key to building an analytic vocabulary. Focusing on these embodied, artistic practices, I constructed a socio-symbolic approach (McLaren, 1986; Willis, 2000) for defining and expressing the multi-media, cultural discourse of the girls. Stressing the materiality and felt-nature of the Dramagirl learning aesthetic and practice,

this socio-symbolic approach provided the analytic framework for the construction of both the visual panels and my research performance.

Working above and beyond the language paradigm, Dramagirls builds capacity for aesthetic communication inherent in symbolic forms--image, gesture, and dramatic play. The first goal of my social-symbolic analysis then, was to identify and characterize the various, tangible media that girls were engaged in to produce these forms, and then understand how those forms lend themselves to symbolic meaning-making. Though the socio-symbolic perspective is best described by Willis (2000) as focusing on active engagements between human subjectivity and material objects in everyday meaning-making, this approach was also informed by earlier work in educational anthropology (Hymes, 1982) and interactional ethnography (Greene & Bloome, 1983, 1997; Castenheira et al, 2001) that redirected attention to the microcosm of how moment-to-moment communications are shaped. This micro-approach model honors the intimate, ephemeral and often spontaneous quality of teaching and learning moments in Dramagirls, and allows them to serve as platforms for building theories about Dramagirls as a multi-modal learning environment.

To identify multiple discourse modes, I constructed a descriptive field that could allow me to interpret in three primary modes of expression that ground Dramagirls' spectacle-theater-making culture-- visual/object-based, performative and linguistic. Mapping these symbolic modes of communication allowed me to honor Dramagirls' intermedial use of primary artistic forms, as well as representing their constructions of symbolic, intertextual meanings (see Figure 4 below).

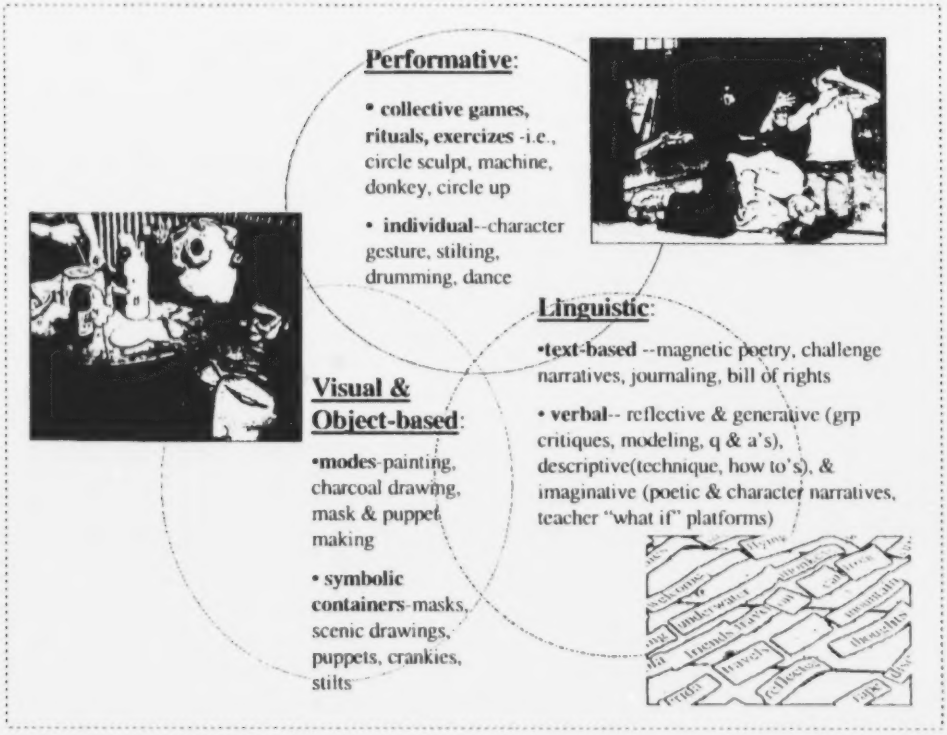
Performative:
• collective games, rituals, exercizes -i.e., circle sculpt, machine, donkey, circle up
• individual--character gesture, stilting, drumming, dance
Linguistic:
•text-based --magnetic poetry, challenge narratives, journaling, bill of rights
• verbal-- reflective & generative (grp critiques, modeling, q & a's), descriptive(technique, how to's), & imaginative (poetic & character narratives, teacher "what if" platforms)
Visual & Object-based:
•modes-painting, charcoal drawing, mask & puppet making
• symbolic containers-masks, scenic drawings, puppets, crankies, stilts

Figure 4-Socio-symbolic Framework

Though I had established a reliable coding process that I could submit to constant comparison through interviews, participant checks, the trick still lay in my final act of interpretation and writing, where linguistic vocabularies can sometimes distort and/ or re-categorize the inherent qualities of sensory data. Since I was attempting to qualify the live, visual and performative discourse processes of Dramagirls spectacle theater-making, I needed to discover alternative, presentational forms that could be translated into final written and visual forms of the dissertation. In the process of locating intermedial and conceptual relationships between the three symbolic modes—linguistic, visual / object based and performative—I began to see that it was the quality of the girls lived connections between mediums and their re-constructions of an ideal girls world that generated the deeper substance of Dramagirl discourse. As I delved further into coding these formal, social and conceptual connections, I realized that particular practices of spectacle theater-making, namely the aesthetics of collage, mask-work and performance, could

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help me generate deeper articulations of what I was learning about the girls meaning-making as a complex and transformative artistic process.

IV. Moving From Description Toward Performance—Documenting with Reggio Emilia Panels:

"What I'm trying to understand is how by layering

All of these different mediums together

You're actually making a text

But it's not always based on print

It's based on movement

It's based on emotional charges coming out of the puppets

It's based on reflections

all the talk

That's part of making a text

That's part of understanding

Okay, "this is about a girl who's forgotten how to dream and this is how she gets there."

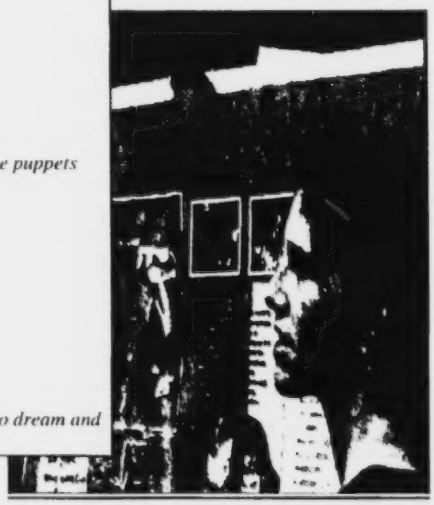

Figure 5: Presentation of collage panels to Dramagirls, March 18, 2002[8].

Eisner and Barone (Jaeger, 1997) argue that in arts-based inquiry, the representative medium matters, not only because it frames the qualities of the particular learning genre, but generates complementary artistic features such as virtual reality, ambiguity, contextualized and expressive language and aesthetic form. I wanted to illuminate those qualities already present in Dramagirls emerging practices with multiple media, creative disorder, and collaborative learning. The visual documentation process of Reggio Emilia, an Italian, arts-based early childhood

[8] The text and image in Figure 5 represents both original transcripts / video freezes from my first presentation of the panels to Dramagirls during fieldwork, but also a piece of the final ethnographic "performance". Here is a reconstructed moment where the researcher wishes to explain their "work" to their fieldwork participants.

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The visual documentation process of Reggio Emilia, an Italian, arts-based early childhood learning approach that has been gaining interest in the United States (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998) was sympathetic to the Dramagirls aesthetic. Reggio Emilia centers its pedagogy on the intellectual, social and emotional creativity of young children, and uses arts-based skills to further students' natural inclinations toward improvised discovery in the world. Documentation of the children's learning process is a standard part of classroom practice, extending both the children's and teacher's understandings of what has been learned, as well as providing an aesthetic frame for learning rituals, whether they involve talking, jumping in puddles to study reflection, or drawing the motion of a bicycle wheel. Reggio Emilia documentation panels can be described as collage constructions, involving multiple media such as photos, verbal discourse transcripts of children's questions and comments, raw artifacts, and children's work such as drawings, sculpture, and choreographed movement maps. I should emphasize that these are not typical "A-paper" bulletin boards, but are essential and beautifully designed learning tools that reflect students true learning experiences, provide springboards for upcoming learning inquiries, and become permanent art within the school's physical architecture.

As a method, the Reggio-Emilia inspired panels enabled me to engage early on with the Dramagirls' formal aesthetic language by providing my own visual presentation of their experience, inviting participant response, and contributing to the developing architecture of their Girltopian space. Constructed every other month during my seven months of fieldwork, these six-foot panels were discussed with participants and displayed in the Dramagirls crowded church gymnasium throughout their Girltopia project. I liked to think that these became my, and their foundational learning canvases. When time permitted, I conducted spontaneous interviews with the girls about the panels, asked for their constructive criticism, and had them contribute additional reflective "talk" right onto the surface. These panels became springboards for artistic reflection and critique among girls and teaching artists during their artistic process, though unfortunately a busy schedule did not allow for me to schedule more than one formal discussion of the panels.

Construction of the panels involved several steps. To prepare each panel's design, I spent approximately 10 hours choosing particular audio/video transcripts, girls' original art, performance images, interviews and my own drawings to represent their process of building a Girltopia. Based on two early coding categories I had developed for looking at Dramagirl discourse, interaction (social and spatial processes) and intermediality (medium-based literacies), I selected data that could reflect these developing categories and questions that arose in my fieldnotes concerning them. Second, I pieced, mounted and labeled the collaged materials together using basic, tactile materials—photograph paper, laminated sheets, construction paper, typing paper, paint, markers—arranging them to reflected the non-linear and risk-taking movement of the Dramagirls expedition into Girltopia. Observed patterns and themes evolved in two rounds, helping to focus my analytic vocabulary and remaining questions about Dramagirl discourse / multiple literacy practices.

Panels Themes & Developments:

As each panel was dedicated to either interaction or intermediality, I included guiding questions as well as definitions of these terms on the panels to help frame the intent of the collaged materials for my participant audience. (Figures 6 & 7)

> *INTERACTION is a term I use to describe the social relations between Dramagirl teaching artists, girls and mentors, particularly how you engage in a sensory, whole-body experience with the concepts, materials and artistic practices. Through your interactions, I want to understand how participants relate to each other in ways that balance authority, responsibility and creative collaboration.*
>
> *INTERMEDIALITY is a term I want to use to describe how Dramagirls construct a theatrical text by simultaneously using language, visual props and physical activity, in various media to transform literal meanings into a symbolic performance.*

Figure 6: Research Text, Panels 1 & 2, March 2002

Interaction Fieldwork Questions: ***What is the social and aesthetic environment?***	**Mode / Theme Patterns**	**Collage Detail:**	**Emerging Codes**
How do artists and girls relate? What are the rituals and roles in this space?	Collaborative action & inquiry, learning aesthetics of practice (relationships via art), expeditionary language	Circle sentiments, girl/ teaching artist reflections, body sculpture & game photos, girls with masks, moon performances	Community & intimacy-building genre, parallel worlds / living and creating Girltopia via Art
How do bodies, voices and objects interact in this space?	Parallel modes generate aesthetic practices of spectacle theater	Varos painting feeds fear exercize	Multi-modal aesthetic capacity, process-oriented literacies
How do you establish a creative community in which all feel empowered to contribute to their Girltopia?	Circling up, creating safe space for risk in interaction	Donkey, chair and cover space games. Teacher language	Building aesthetic capacity and safe aesthetic environment
Intermediality Fieldwork Questions:	**Mode / Theme / Patterns**	**Collage Detail:**	**Emerging Codes:**
How do you begin to construct a theatrical text without a script?	Improvising through mask-construction, performance and poetry, reflection and critique, re-construct in multiple materials	Word poetry, circle & fabricsculpting, mask dev.	Multi-modal aesthetic literacies, intermedial connections
How does DG use multiple media to construct a collaborative theater piece based on the concept of Girltopia?	Improvise with themes of Girltopia, creating a safe space, empowerment, bill of rights	Bill of rights text/ teacher platforms, Building journey machine	Multi-modal literacies, cultural performance through dramatic play
Are certain artistic modes fore-grounded in the process?	Performance, object-based work	Negotiations of Puppets, masks, stilting, gesture	Building aesthetic capacity through objective materials, movement as springboard for reflection

Figure 7: 1st Round Panel Development

Because both of these representative categories mutually provided social and formal context for Dramagirl capacities and practices, constructing the panels allowed me to see where my questions and emerging codes overlapped. For instance, Dramagirls' interactive environment emerged through the intermedial connections that were played out in workshop practices, so that social, spatial, and aesthetic meanings are working reciprocally. Exploring these terms with the panels also showed me gaps in my analytic process, for instance that interaction and intermediality did not fully explore issues of cultural identity.

For the second round of panels I followed a similar set-up, though at this point I had moved beyond establishing general categories, and was trying to visually understand how the

Girltopia concept was developing. Thematic titles developed for the final panels, "Building an authentic Girl Culture" and "What is the Journey to Girltopia" explored both patterns of cultural performance, as well as delving deeper into the conceptual narrative of Girltopia. Prior to constructing this second round, I initiated a silent writing activity that allowed girls to narrate the panel documentation more fully. They recorded their responses on laminate sheets to questions I would ask about their process, and in many cases my direct questions were left for more immediate conversations with the girls.

These conversations raised possible meanings that could be drawn from the panel constructions, including girls' intertextual / medial understandings of the Girltopia concept through both their experiences as architects of both an imaginary world, as well as their everyday lives. In response to my question, How would you explain your experience of Girltopia?, one of the more seasoned Dramagirls, an 7th grader wrote in capitols with a red sharpie,"Girltopia is about making fantasy a reality". Her simple statement reinforced for me a profound understanding of how the Dramagirls aesthetics of practice, by building a reality via imaginative practices, engages girls in building a habitable culture, as well as performing their own creative literacies. Documenting this process in collage made the fictional and real journey into Girltopia visible, giving me a window into several significant qualities particular to Dramagirl discourse.

Panel Discoveries:

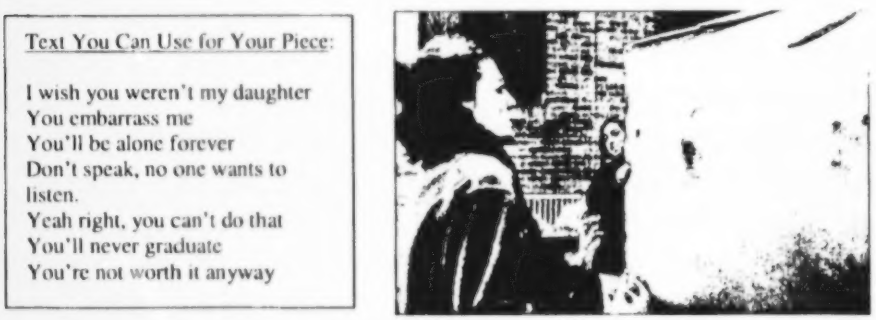
Text You Can Use for Your Piece:
I wish you weren't my daughter
You embarrass me
You'll be alone forever
Don't speak, no one wants to listen.
Yeah right, you can't do that
You'll never graduate
You're not worth it anyway

Figure 8: Collage materials[9]

[9] The dialogue and photo in this figure represent raw data that I applied to the collages. The text represent distilled dialogue from girls responses to a written exercise, and the photo captures a theatrical experiment using these lines of dialogue behind a piece of stretchy material stretched to serve as a malleable body canvas.

A. *Documenting Dramagirls aesthetic practice with collage mirrored the pedagogical style of Redmoon's spectacle-theater, and Dramagirls learning.* Just as an observer might say about a chaotic, but deeply immersed classroom, audience members often leave Redmoon shows exclaiming, "I have no idea what was going on, but it was really interesting!" For observers, the spectacle theater experience is non-linear, unscripted, and multi-modal. To follow it is to drop into a maze of mediums and theatrical activity. Redmoon artists teach their practice in similar style—their theater-making does not always progress forward, as might a traditional reading lesson, but begins simultaneously with all possible mediums, approaches and subjective material, the aim being to re-conceptualize a concept from as many angles as possible, to produce a spectacle of images and activity. The panel design aimed to mirror a collaged and incongruous learning process that looks, but makes conceptual and formal 'sense' as a meaningful, creative discourse. Grumet & Pinar (1976) description of *currere*, or curriculum as a reconceptualizing force in the figure-of-8[10] helps to qualify how Redmoon's panoramic learning process activates opposing energies as participants search for theatrical meaning, such as: 1) regressive –the girls remembered individual fears to bring those experiences into their present drama, 2) progressive- girls are attempting to pave a future world for themselves and other girls, and 3) synthetical- girls are deepening the possibilities of an ideal world for girls through their daily engagement with hands on dramatic play and media.

Redmoon's aesthetic also defies the high-tech age by using many hands and bodies to manipulate tactile, found materials (Figure 8). During one Dramagirls session I watched three groups of girls using three different theatrical platforms, a shadow screen, a band of pink flexible material, and a huge ensemble costume with room for twelve heads. They spent two and a half hours exploring the same segment of spoken text for the opening scene where a girl confronts her fears—making shadows, warping their expressions, bodies and voices within fabric and light. Many of these mediums were later discarded, but all had generated aesthetic texture for the

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[10] See Grumet's discussion of Mary Caroline Richard's (*The Crossing Point*, 1973) reconceptualist model of educational experience which she sees as an organic process of oppositional energies—past and future, subjectivity/objectivity, consciousness / matter, etc. This reconceptualist approach to the learning experience is also akin to Dewey's *Art As Experience* (1934).conception of aesthetic, experiential learning, a theory I use in my dissertation discussion of developing aesthetic capacities.

opening scene—how menacing the quality should be, should the girl be immersed or isolated from her fears etc.

Figure 9: Grinding Moon Dust

B. The panels produced a richer sense of the Dramagirls engagement in a aesthetic, collaborative ritual, particularly in the way that every action, object or thought produced for Girltopia extended both individual and group felt-meanings. Courtney writes that, "our actions with any media, if they are pregnant with felt meaning have a ritual quality, and, thus, we learn about both the medium and the message" (Courtney, 45). Like Langer's idea of "significant-form", here Courtney refers to felt -meaning as not simply human emotion, but an aesthetic mode of thought generated in artistic practice to produce embodied feelings. Through the multi-media rituals of spectacle-theater making, such as learning to relate to others in object-focused theater games, or constructing a mask to inhabit a specific character, Dramagirls not only learned the artistic practices that enabled them to contribute to a group theater project; more importantly, their imaginary concept gained meaning through their formal, collaborative interactions with these artistic media.

Girltopia is a symbolic, felt world, an imagined space for acting out an emerging reality with an existing reality, such as, surviving as a girl in Chicago. Represented by either images, objects, or dramatic exercises set up by the teaching artists, the panels documented how Dramagirls Girltopian felt-meanings evolved through the production of metaphors and symbols. A good example was the evolution of the moon character in their theater piece, which had been

introduced through a Remedios Varos drawing of a woman spinning moon dust to inspire a beginning to their theatrical search for Girltopia. A girl had forgotten how to dream, and she needed inspiration for her journey to recapture this ability. The panels followed the moon's involvement beginning with my own rendition of Varos painting of a contemporary girl grinding moon dust, Dramagirls re-interpretations of the Varos image in pencil, improvisational performances of the Varos image with found materials, and last the gestural choreography of a 5th grader as the moon in their final performance (Figure 9).

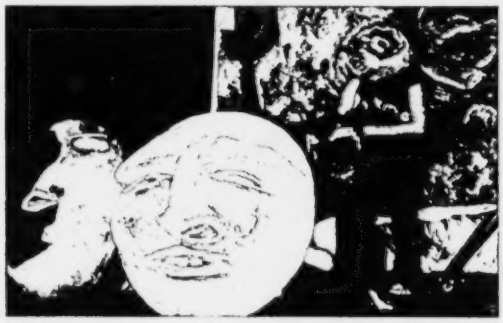

Figure 10- Embodying the "Objective Source"

C. *By showing the sensuous, physical landscape of the girls' explorations through gesture, imaginative wordplay, intimate mask and object-work, the collages tangibly pieced together a sense of the Dramagirl "body-subject"*[11]. The theatrical process accesses what Grumet describes as a phenomenological display of conscious, whole-body learning-- "theater presents the body-subject" (Bitter Milk, 1988 , 69). Documenting by way of collage put me in the practice of looking closely at bodies, words and objects in motion, and how the live interplay of subjective and objective material produced symbolic meaning in various media. For instance, by exhibiting this interplay of aesthetic modes, I could see how a girls' development of the objective source character mask had sewn the seeds for another girls self-exploratory character work in gesture and voice—making use of the cockeyed expression, the wide brow, the disheveled hair to form her own embodied understanding of that mask. This exhibition of the

[11] For more on phenomenological approaches to whole-body communication, see Merleau-Ponty's work.

body-subject through the panels was significant not only because it revealed how fluidly the subjective and objective modes are merged in Dramagirl practice, but also that it showed the liminal, risk-taking that girls took on in their improvisational practices. Their masks, movements, and collaborative efforts were always in flux, their role in the journey to Girltopia always unsure. When I presented the first two panels during rehearsal, one of the girls exclaimed, "we were there? We did all that? The panels jogged participant memory in terms of all of the artistic leaps their bodies had taken.

V. Doing Ethnographic Performance

For performance-ethnography pioneer Zora Neale Hurston (1934), there is no choice between being an academic and a performer —one must do both to be actively 'in touch' with the human culture you've immersed yourself in. What the panels still couldn't quite capture was the liveness of Dramagirls culture (Auslander, 1999), particularly how girls were re-constructing cultural identities for themselves through their liminal, theatrical performances. In order to reconstruct their cultural identities, as well as re-play my own experience in the field, I created a 20-minute ethnographic performance, a reflexive approach supported by ethnographers and performance anthropologists (Clifford, 1986; Conquergood, 199; Geertz, 1973; Hurston, 1934; Jackson, 1998; Turner, 1982, 1988).

The performance's aesthetic was informed by the ethno-poetic theater of Anna Deveare Smith (1992) and the "moment" based performance of Moises Kaufman / Tectonic Theater (2001). Both use ethno-poetic transcription to crystallize meanings from interview and dialogue transcripts to access the dramatic essence of participating voices and bodies. Mask and object work (Figure follows Redmoon Theater's (2001) and Bread & Puppet Theater's (Schumann, 1990) genre of spectacle theater, where the object, structure or ritual becomes equal to the performer. This balance echoes philosophies on aesthetic experience as a dramatic struggle between the 'inner' materials and objective materials of artistic expression (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Eisner, 1991, 1993). Data sources for this presentation involved selections from over 70 hours of digital video and audio recordings of girls and teaching artists during regular

Dramagirl workshop rehearsals, ongoing interviews and participant reviews with both girls and artists, as well as the Reggio-Emilia style research panels constructed earlier in my fieldwork.

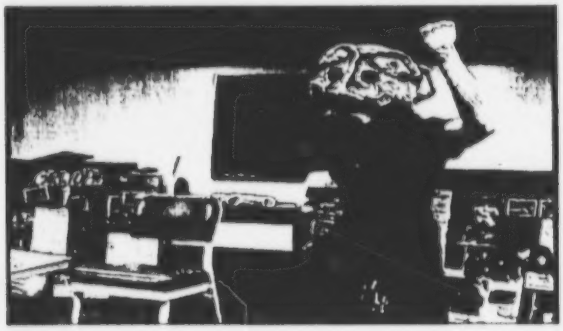

Figure 11- Mask-work with Warrior Archetype

The script-development process involved several steps. Using my research role and the four goddesses as thematic guides, I pulled selections from individual interviews and in-class dialogues between myself and the girls that extended conversations not only about artistic and cultural concepts, but also formal processes engaged by the girls and myself as artists. Without adding any new language, I then did an ethno-poetic transcription (Anna Deveare Smith, 1994; Fine, 1982) of each of these selections. This requires honing the transcribed voices into dramatic poetry, creating room around the words for gesture, emotional expression, object and mask-work. In a sense, making "room" mirrors what happens in Dramagirls workshops when language is no longer an accurate medium for fulfilling not just a conceptual exploration, but their lived experience of Girltopia. Using these poetic transcriptions, I then began to rehearse physical gesture, mask-work and song based not only on the girls' ideas, but also on my own discoveries while performing in the masks and speaking their voices.

Originally I had only a general idea that I wanted to give a sense of the relational dynamics and artistic process of the girls and women, to collage together their individual responses to the process in ways that revealed the ambiguity and color of the dramagirl experience. As I was zooming through video data for a class assignment in performance ethnography, I was shocked to come upon documentation of my first presentation of the research panels to the Dramagirls. How I presented myself, how I gestured and paused in my address, --though improvised, it was definitely a self-conscious performance and I thought it might be worth reconstructing to characterize my emerging role as researcher, just as Dramagirls were emerging as artists . . . I have never felt so exposed as a researcher. Here I was speaking the meaning of my research within a frame that intends to move people, not just inform, and that I was afraid it might not do both."

(June 7, method fieldnote)

The researcher performs herself presenting to the Dramagirls--

One of the challenges of being a researcher is you're worried about, um,
Making sense to the people who are participating in your research, right,
Because they're going along,
And they're the experts at what they're doing
You're the experts in Dramagirls
You know the process inside and out
You're participating in it everyday
(pause)
And I'm coming in with a very different language for thinking about, umm
What kind of environment this is
How you learn, how you talk to each other,
How you use mediums
Do you guys know what mediums are, the girls?

(***"Building A Girltopia" performance excerpt #1***)

(Linguistic Coding: Underline = dramatic emphasis)

Figure 12: The Researcher Constructs a Performance of Herself

Though choosing to stage a performance of my research "performance" was only the beginning to a twenty-minute part of the performance I'll describe, the action was significant to my fieldwork as well as my developing identity as an art-based educational researcher. It was frightening and rewarding to re-present myself as a learner, acutely reminding me of the risks the girls took everyday to present themselves, their understandings, and to leap into new creative activity.

Fabian's (1990) approach to performance as not only a way of communicating with research participants, but as a means of making research discoveries by actively engaging their cultural performances grounded the remainder of my performance. I focused on embodying the girls' experiences of producing intertextual meanings around their Girltopia concept. I had first

been concerned with the fact that the four archetypal character-types had not been originated by the girls themselves, but from teaching artist's platforms. However, by observing and then embodying their dramatic reflections surrounding these characters, I realized that the Girltopia goddess archetypes had acted as formal and conceptual springboards for girls creative articulations of self--both in their imaginary and real experiences of girlhood. In fact their reflections on these archetypes tended to work against the grain of the cliché, such as "nurturing mother". I decided to focus on those juxtapositions as I chose transcript material. For instance, after performing gestural choreography around the nurturing mother mask, the following interview excerpt dramatizes a Dramagirl's ambivalence toward the very idea of mothering:

And there's Karen—
(*energy slumped, sly, quick talker*)
She hangs out with my friends and me.
My mom's always calling my girlfriends
(*looking down*)
to figure out
what's going on with me.
She'll be like, "what's going on with her,
(*speak to mask at arm's length*)
I know something's wrong!"
It's hard to be a mom
Because you can never be a perfect mom.
(*facing audience*)
I'll be like "no, there's nothing!"
(*push mask away, BEAT*)
She always wants to fix it.
("Building A Girltopia," excerpt #2)

Figure 13: Performing Voices on Mothering

Karen's intertextual connection with mothering reveals a distinct tension between the nurturing goddess character that she imagines playing in Girltopia, and the social reality of her own mother-daughter relationship. This tension only became clear to me when I began to manipulate the mask with her text. Another example was the objective source, the most difficult of the archetypes for the girls. A question I ask of the audience before donning this mask is, "how do you show that you're being objective?" The text I chose here (Figure 14) winks at the idea that anyone can really be "objective", and that she senses true difference, however flippant the expression, between boys and girls minds:

Boys, they have different minds
than girls
(*sing song head gesture*)
They have wierdish kinda minds
Like freaky minds
(*circling hands, frown*)
But girls, they have straight straight
minds, you know
They're just thinking about what
they're gonna do next
(*hands crossed to chest,moving out*)
What's goint'a happen in the world
instead of cute boys,
Cute boys calling them out and
everything
(***"Building A Girltopia", excerpt #3***)

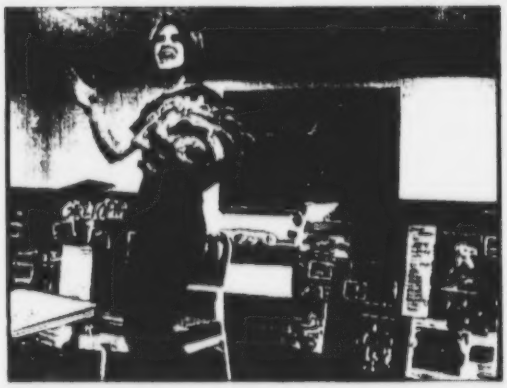

Figure 14: Performing Voices on Being Objective

Practicing the mask-work in particular was significant for understanding the girls' liminal discourse as they risked articulating self through fictional characters. Lecog (2001) says of mask-work learners that "they have learned not to play themselves but to play *using themselves*" (p. 61) As I took on the girls voices and bodies, I began to understand how by stepping outside of themselves in the masks, they were able to freely explore felt-meanings that were close to home, ultimately allowing them to risk performing themselves in public.

VI. Conclusion:

By considering alternative forms for presenting educational research, particularly arts-based approaches that illuminate artistic practices among youth, the multi-disciplinary field of arts-based learning may expand both its scholarly methods, as well as theoretical frameworks for understanding how youth develop creative literacies. Using Reggio Emilia-inspired panels and ethnographic performance allowed me to reconceptualize my interpretative process by prioritizing the visual, material and embodied modes of Dramagirls learning. Through these practices, I was able to honor artistic learning that springs not from school-oriented pedagogies, but from the visions of professional theater artists who are helping youth to design their own aesthetic, social and cultural compasses. And, as I've tried to express in this paper, arts-based

methods do more than promise refreshing perspectives for developing learners; they provide an exploratory window for researchers to develop their own creative practice.

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